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ABSTRACT

Between 1983 and 1984, tax referenda for Sauk Valley College (SVC) were on the ballot three times. Research conducted before and after the tax referendum failed to pass in November 1983 provided the basis for strategy enhancement that brought SVC closer to its goal in March 1984 and finally to the achievement of the goal in November. In October 1983, a telephone survey of 502 district residents was conducted to determine public perceptions of the scope and quality of SVC programs; the extent of public involvement with SVC; the prospective market for SVC; and the primary information sources used by the public concerning SVC. Several of the conclusions of the pre-referendum study had a direct bearing on the electoral process, e.g., while those who were well-informed about the college and interested in it were also very involved with SVC, 71% of the respondents were neither well-informed about nor interested in SVC, were soft in their support of the college, and could be expected to filter out most messages about the college. After the election, the survey respondents were contacted to find out about their voting behavior, revealing a correlation between voting behavior, various demographic measures, the attentiveness model, and the index of involvement used in the study. Findings from the follow-up study were useful in developing the March 1984 and November 1984 campaign strategies, such as mobilizing the informed/interested public; building the campaign around the groups most involved with the college (i.e., staff, alumni, students, and friends of SVC); and emphasizing community leadership and involvement in the campaign. (AYC)

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VOTER PARTICIPATION IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE REFERENDUM

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on three tax levy referenda attempts for a community college within one year. Each campaign was conducted with a different strategy. The last, in November 1984 was successful.

Research on voter participation was conducted by the Public Opinion Research Laboratory at Northern Illinois University after the first attempt in November 1983. Respondents from an earlier marketing study were contacted by telephone and asked about their voting behavior. The sample was divided into three groups: the attentive, interested and nonattentive publics based on their interest in and knowledge about Sauk Valley College. The analysis of these groups and their voting behavior provided the basis for strategy in subsequent referenda campaigns.

VOTER PARTICIPATION IN A COMMUNITY COLLEGE REFERENDUM

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Sauk Valley College is a public comprehensive community college located in northwestern Illinois. The region served by the college includes portions of six counties and includes approximately 1,466 square miles with a population of 109,147. 39% of the population is concentrated in the three cities of Dixon, Sterling and Rock Falls with the remainder residing in small towns, villages, and rural areas throughout the region. The three major aspects of the area economy are agriculture, steel production, and light manufacturing predominately in the area of auto accessories and hardware.

Like most public community colleges Sauk is partially funded through local property taxes and a public referendum is required to change the levy rate for the operating funds. Sauk's levy rate, established at 15¢ per $100 of assessed valuation in 1965 when the college was founded, has been inadequate for many years. Referenda were attempted in 1969, 1970, 1978, and 1979 to raise this rate. Despite the acknowledged central role the college held in the educational and cultural life of the community, the referenda failed. By 1983 the financial situation at the college was critical and a commitment was made to again attempt to raise the levy rate.

The environment was not the best for such an undertaking. There had been continued resistance to raising taxes even a small amount as evidenced by the previous referenda failures. The large farm

community was already overburdened by taxes. Area unemployment was high and economic conditions poor. Nevertheless, a tax increase was urgently needed to reduce a growing cumulative budget deficit.

During a one year period, tax referenda for Sauk were on the ballot three times - November 1983, March 1984 and November 1984. The first two failed but the third passed. Each campaign was conducted with a different strategy and style. We had the rare opportunity to compare these strategies and fully develop a model that was eventually successful.

The research reported in this paper was conducted both before and after the November 1983 election. The results of the research provided a basis for strategy enhancement that brought Sauk closer to its goal in March 1984, and finally to achievement of the goal in November 1984.

In October 1983 the Public Opinion Research Laboratory at Northern Illinois University conducted a probability sample telephone survey of 502 citizens in the district served by Sauk Valley College. The research was funded by an H.E.A. Title III Planning Grant Sauk received in fiscal year 1983. The purposes of the survey were to ascertain:

1. Public perceptions of the scope and quality of Sauk Valley College programs
2. The extent of public involvement with Sauk Valley College
3. The prospective market for Sauk Valley College
4. The primary information sources used by the public concerning Sauk Valley College

No questions were asked on the survey about finance, tax rate, or the upcoming referendum.

In their analysis of the survey results, Ellen Dran and Jon Miller (1983) applied the attentive public model proposed by Gabriel Almond in 1950. Given a large number of policy issues most people will limit their area of interest and competence to only a few. They will select these areas according to their interest and involvement with the issues. The attentive public for an issue are those persons who are both interested in and well informed about an issue.

Based on this model a number of questions in the survey measured the level of interest in the college and the respondents' self-perceived level of knowledge about the college. The respondents were then divided into three categories:

1. Attentive public - both interested and well informed.
2. Interested public - interested but not well informed.
3. Nonattentive public - neither interested nor well informed.

Table 1 on the next page shows the distribution of the sample among these categories. It is noteworthy that women are more likely to be in the interested public than men of the same ages. Younger people age 18-34 were less likely to be in the interested public than other age groups.

TABLE 1

Attentiveness to Sauk Valley College: Age and Gender

Gender	Age	Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	N
Male	18 - 34	6%	12%	82%	72
	35 - 54	7	20	73	83
	55 plus	4	22	74	46
All males		6	18	76	201
Female	18 - 34	7	16	77	92
	35 - 54	6	29	65	99
	55 plus	7	33	60	110
All females		7	27	67	301
Total		6	23	71	502

An Index of Involvement was created to further analyze the nature of the relationship of these three publics to the college. The respondents scored points on six measures of involvement ranging from being a current or former student to attending special events at Sauk. The Index of Involvement was correlated to the three previously identified publics. The results are in Table 2 on the next page. Attentiveness and interest are clearly related to involvement.

TABLE 2

Index of Involvement with Sauk Valley College

Index of Involvement	Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	Total Public
0	7%	26%	43%	37%
1	15	16	26	23
2	19	29	18	21
3	34	21	9	13
4	22	7	4	6
5	0	1	1	1
6	3	0	0	*
N =	32	116	354	502

* = less than 1%

Several conclusions of this first, pre-referendum study have a direct bearing on the referendum process. First the nonattentive public is large - 71%. This public will filter out most messages about the college. Support among the nonattentives is soft. While they have few negative impressions of the college they have few specific positive impressions either. Second, while the attentive public is small their involvement with the college has been extremely high.

The October study was not done specifically to gather information needed to shape a referendum campaign. Indeed, at the time the study was conducted the campaign was drawing to a close. The November 1983 strategy was to be both positive and low-key. The financial issues were rarely discussed or emphasized. Sauk's support publics were not consistently contacted. Instead, mailings went to about 25,000 frequent voters identified by research on previous election records.

The message in these mailings focused on the excellent job Sauk was doing and the central role the college played in the community. Sauk was held in high esteem by the community but the November referendum was defeated by more than a 2 to 1 vote.

After the election we had the rare opportunity to contact the respondents in the October survey and ask them about their voting behavior. The Public Opinion Research Laboratory was able to interview 88% or 442 of the original sample. Reported voting behavior was correlated to various demographic measures, the attentiveness model, and the Index of Involvement. The results appear in Table 3 on the next page (Miller and Dran, 1984).

The data in this table help us to better understand the factors involved in the failure of the November 1983 referendum as well as providing insight and information for planning a future referendum. As would be expected, more attentive voters voted in the November 1983 referendum than the other two groups and the majority of the attentive public were very positive toward the increased levy. Only 43% of the interested public voted in the November referendum, and a majority of these voters favored the increased levy. Only 37% of the nonattentives voted in the November referendum and a substantial percentage voted against the levy.

The Index of Involvement was significantly and positively associated with support for the increased levy. However the Involvement Index had to reach a scale of two or more for this positive association to occur. Being a student or a relative of a student within the past two years was not sufficient involvement to stimulate a majority positive vote. Although men and women turned out

TABLE 3

Sauk Valley College Referendum Vote

	Voted For	Voted Against	Did Not Vote	N*
Total Public:	19%	21%	60%	502
Gender				
Male	16	25	60	211
Female	22	18	61	229
Education				
Less than high school	4	15	81	73
High school graduate	18	21	61	273
Associate or above	33	25	42	94
Attentiveness				
Attentive public	40	13	48	32
Interested public	24	19	57	96
Nonattentive public	15	22	63	313
Student status				
Current student	20	21	59	16
Former student	24	22	55	139
Never student	16	21	63	286
Relative of Student				
Yes	18	19	63	118
No	20	21	59	322
Event Attenders				
None	14	20	66	278
1 Or 2	24	21	55	87
3 or more	33	20	47	76
Involvement Index				
Score = 0	13	20	68	134
1	19	28	54	101
2	23	19	58	92
3	22	15	64	53
4	25	27	48	25
5	75	0	25	3
6	100	0	0	1

*Weighted N

to vote at approximately the same rate, women were more likely to vote for the levy than were men. The level of formal education completed was related to both turnout and a positive vote. Of the 19% of the respondents with less than a high school education, negative voters outnumbered positive voters almost 4 to 1. High school graduates were almost twice as likely to turn out than those with less than a high school degree but more than half voted against the levy. 58% of area residents with at least an associate degree voted on the referendum, a much higher rate than those with a high school degree or less. Their vote was about 3 to 2 in favor of the levy.

Some preliminary conclusions can be drawn from this data. First, is clear from the turnout data that a significant portion of the attentive and interested publics for Sauk stayed at home and did not vote in the November election. Even a majority of current and former students and their families did not vote and those who did were as likely to vote no as yes. It seems clear that Sauk failed to mobilize its friends, i.e. the attentive and interested publics, in the November election. The nonattentive public, while voting at a lower percentage rate than the attentive or interested publics, cast a solid no vote. Since the nonattentives outnumber the other two groups by more than 2½ to 1, this was a highly significant no vote.

The relationships in Table 3 indicate a positive association between the vote on the referendum and the female gender, higher level of education, and attentiveness to and involvement with Sauk. The next stage of the Public Opinion Research Laboratory analysis used a set of multivariate techniques to sort out the relative influence of gender, levels of education, and attentiveness. For purposes of this

analysis all variables were dichotomized. Table 4 displays the results of the multivariate analysis.

TABLE 4

Multivariate Distribution of the Referendum Vote

Gender	Education	Involvement	Attentiveness	Vote: For	Against	None	N*
Male	Less than associate	Low	Not attn.	9%	25%	66%	76
			Attn.	17	25	58	16
		High	Not attn.	14	18	68	29
			Attn.	30	0	70	10
	Associate or more	Low	Not attn.	8	56	37	14
			Attn.	0	0	100	2
		High	Not attn.	29	29	42	7
			Attn.	45	22	33	14
Female	Less than associate	Low	Not attn.	18	16	66	108
			Attn.	17	16	67	25
		High	Not attn.	9	20	70	43
			Attn.	20	22	58	41
	Associate or more	Low	Not attn.	33	20	47	21
			Attn.	21	0	79	5
		High	Not attn.	38	15	46	13
			Attn.	56	17	27	18

*Weighted N

From this table we see that the population segments from which Sauk received its strongest support were:

1. Educated highly involved attentive men for whom turnout was 67% and positive votes outnumbered negative votes 2 to 1.

2. Educated highly involved women whether attentive or not for whom turnout was high with postive votes outnumbering negative votes more than 2 to 1 for nonattentives and more than 3 to 1 for attentives.

Educated women with a low involvement score also cast a majority of their votes for the levy.

Path analysis was performed in order to identify the relative contribution of the variables of gender, education, involvement, and attentiveness on both the level of voter participation in the election and on the vote decision.

The path analysis showed that level of formal education completed was the only direct path to or predictor of voter turnout for the referendum. Although education and involvement are both significant predictors of attentiveness to Sauk, attentiveness is not a direct predictor of voter turnout.

With regard to a predictor of the direction of the vote, the path model indicates that involvement with Sauk often leads to attentiveness and persons attentive to Sauk are more likely to vote in favor of the levy than persons who are nonattentive. The model also indicates that this relationships holds within all gender and educational achievement combinations and that it is not significantly stronger within any particular set of conditions.

Several major conclusions emerge from the analysis which were useful in developing strategy for the March 1984 and eventually the November 1984 referenda. While attentivenss did not predict turnout in the November 1983 election, the interest of these citizens in the future of Sauk suggests that they are susceptible to mobilization. They were not mobilized in November 1983 but their mobilization became a top priority in the strategy of later referenda. The analysis also suggests that once the attentives reached the polls, they would be overwhelming supportive of the increased tax levy for Sauk.

The analysis indicates that the major predictor of the attentive and interested public is personal involvement with Sauk. In pratical terms this means that a referendum campaign must be built around those most involved with Sauk, i.e. the staff, alumni, students, former students, and friends of Sauk Valley College. In other words it was absolutely essential to organize a vigorous turnout campaign among Sauk's core support groups and to make a strong and direct argument for the additional funding.

The Public Opinion Research Laboratory cautioned against attempting a referendum in a high turnout election such as a presidential election. At these elections a large number of nonattentive voters would be expected to be present and would be expected to vote negatively on a referendum. It would be much more difficult to mobilize and inform the attentive and interested public in sufficient numbers to counterbalance the nonattentive public in a large turnout election.

Within the constraints of the Illinois uniform election law the next opportunity to place the referendum on the ballot was in March 1984. At the urging of the staff, students, alumni, and friends of Sauk, the Board of Trustees decided to place the question on the ballot despite the fact that the time required for planning and implementing the camapaign was very very short. The campaign did in fact focus on mobilizing those support groups it was possible to contact. Specifically the effort focused on alumni, staff, current students, and families and friends of current and former students. Throughout all three campaigns the media was very supportive and this gave us the added opportunity to place our message before the public.

The vote in the March 1984 election was significantly better than in November 1983 with nearly 47% of the voters voting for the referendum.

Although we had been cautioned against placing the question on the ballot in a large turnout election the next available opportunity for a vote was the November 1984 general election. Staff, students, and friends of Sauk again urged the trustees to place the question on the ballot in November. The momentum of the great gain in positive votes in the March referendum inspired a belief that we could mobilize significant support even in a large turnout election.

The one element that we added to the November strategy which had not been present in any of the previous referenda was key leadership and involvement from the community. A citizens steering committee was formed and the large geographic area covered by Sauk's district was divided and subdivided into various citizens committees. In the end more than 1,000 area citizens were actively working to pass the tax levy increase. The overall strategy focused on mobilizing and informing our core support groups. Some 15 separate groups were identified and deluged with written materials and speeches. In addition a telephone canvass was conducted of the general public to identify the positive voters and better inform those who were marginal.

The November 6, 1984 referendum passed in a large turnout election by a margin of 56% voting in favor of the increased levy. In one year's time, from November 1983 to November 1984, by utilizing and applying the attentiveness and involvement models we were able to turn an election from a 30% favorable to a 56% favorable vote. This represents a 187% increase. In terms of numbers, almost as many

people - 23,987 - voted yes in the November 6 election as the total number of votes casts in the March election. The number of persons voting yes in the November 6, 1984 election was more than double the number of persons voting yes in March. The number of persons voting no in the November 1984 election was only 44% higher than the number of persons voting no in the March 1984 election.

Although definitive research is not available to verify this, it is our feeling that a great number of the interested public could now be classified as attentives and a significant number of nonattentives have now joined the ranks of the interested public.

The attentive public model and the involved public concept appear to be significant and extremely useful in educational politics. Educational institutions at every level would benefit if they focused on enlarging their attentive and interested publics. This requires an active and positive effort on the part of the institution. If such an effort is not mounted, the attentive and interested publics will remain small. When a political issue arises, it will be more difficult to win a majority vote if the nonattentives significantly outnumber the support groups.

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